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Early Education in Ethiopia: Progress and Prospects

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Explored herein are historical roots of preschool through elementary grade education in the East Africa nation of Ethiopia. Also included are current difficult challenges to educational improvement as well as promising developments such as greater involvement of private institutions, organizations, and individuals in supporting Ministry of Education reform initiatives.

KEY WORDS: early childhood education; primary education; early education in Ethiopia; international education.

INTRODUCTION

Mention of the African nation of Ethiopia is likely to elicit visions of child victims of famine and children (thosse fortunate to attend school) in poor quality, overcrowded schools that are unlikely to prepare them for the 21st century. This vision, which emerged from the world media response to the drought of the mid-1980s, remains a reality in drought-affected areas of Ethiopia today. Research to date (e.g., Bredekamp, Knuth, Kunesh, & Shulman, 1992) strongly suggests that the best hope for changing this vision is to invest scarce resources where they are most likely to result in maximum benefits—in the education of children during their earliest years. This article provides a historical overview of early education in Ethiopia, progress in recent years, and prospects for changing the world's perceptions of this rapidly developing nation.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF EARLY SCHOOLING IN ETHIOPIA

Two major traditions characterize the development of education in Ethiopia—"traditional" and "Western" systems. While Western educational ideas have flourished since the early twentieth century, the traditional approach has characterized Ethiopian education throughout the history of this ancient nation. This traditional system is deeply rooted in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and is recognized as one of the oldest educational systems in the world. For centuries, Orthodox churches, monasteries, and convents were the only centers for formal learning from preschool through the university level. Traditional subjects of study in these programs included theology, philosophy, computation, history, poetry, and music (Pankhurst, 1955; Wagaw, 1979).

At least for males, the importance of early education was recognized as early as Medieval Ethiopia. Pankhurst (1992), for example, writes:

> Early historical data on children in Ethiopia is so scant that it is almost as though they were neither seen nor heard. We can, however, catch occasional glimpses of the medieval educational system which must have existed for centuries. (p. 3)

During the Medieval period, male children began attending church services at around age 4. At these services children began the first stages of formal education. The curriculum for children of this age consisted primarily of drill and practice of the alphabet. Mastery of the alphabet was followed by reading and recitation of religious texts that began with the Psalms of David.

During the nineteenth century, Swiss missionary Gobat provided one of the most thorough descriptions of early education in Ethiopia. In describing the more formal church education Gobat observed:

> Having learned to read . . . they were required to commit to the Gospel of St. John, and to study several of St. Paul's Epistles and a number of the Homilies of St.

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> Chrysostom; after which they were assigned the task of learning by heart the Psalm of David, the *Waddase Mariam*, or Praises of Mary, and several prayers, and were supposed to memorize long lists of Ge'ez words. After this they would sit at the feet of renowned masters who would explain to them the scriptures and other texts, including . . . traditional Ethiopian code of law. The course thus embraced seven years on chanting (music), nine years on grammar, and four on poetry . . . after which the student had to face the sacred books of the Old and New Testament. There were in addition courses in civil and canonical law, astronomy and history. (cited in Pankhurst, 1992, p. 130)

As these examples illustrate, Ethiopia has a long history of didactic education provided almost exclusively to male children. By the end of the nineteenth century, a few changes emerged in the formal education of young children. The emperor of the country at that time, Menelik II (emperor from 1889–1913), recognized that greatly improved education would be needed for a modern Ethiopia. In line with his aspirations, in 1908 Menelik established the first public school, called Menelik II Primary and Secondary School. Eight years prior to the establishment of this public school, however, the first modern preschool (kindergarten) was established in Dire Dawa, a town in the eastern part of the country. This kindergarten was created for the children of French consultants who were helping build Ethiopia's first railroad. Development of such programs was very slow compared to kindergarten expansion in other nations during the same period of time. From 1908 to 1974, for example, only 77 kindergartens were established in Ethiopia. Moreover, these programs provided education for only 7,573 out of the 3.5 million children aged 4–6. In addition, these kindergartens were limited to urban areas of the country and operated by missionaries, private organizations, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Development. The federal government at that time paid little attention to early education since it was felt that scarce resources should be directed toward creating literate adults to run the emerging modern state (Negash, 1996; Pankhurst, 1986).

Following the socialist revolution of 1974, preprimary education was greatly expanded. As the result of the increased involvement of women in economic activities, the need for facilities to care for children became increasingly evident. This need resulted in the establishment of day care centers for early care and education. To meet the demand for teachers at this level, a Preschool Teacher Training Center was opened in the capital city, Addis Ababa, in 1986. Additionally, at the Ministry of Education, specialized departments that were responsible for the early childhood education were introduced. These included departments of curriculum development, supervision, and teacher education.

Also contributing to expansion of early childhood education during the socialist period was the launching of the National Literacy Campaign supported by UNESCO in the late 1970s. While supporting literacy in the cities, this campaign also expanded education to the rural parts of the country, where the majority of the population live. Likewise, the formation of Farmers' Cooperatives during this era also contributed to early education, since schools were needed to take care of children while parents were working in the fields.

EARLY EDUCATION IN ETHIOPIA TODAY

In 1994, Ethiopia formulated its new Education and Training Policy (Negash, 1996). This policy addresses educational goals of the nation from kindergarten through the secondary level for the wide variety of educational program types. Table 1 depicts the expanse of early education program types. Through this policy the education of primary grade children (i.e., children in grades 1–8) has been given considerably more government attention than the education of preschool children.

Preschool Education

Since current resources are insufficient for providing even basic primary education to Ethiopian children, the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2002) currently deemphasizes preprimary education. Nevertheless, recognizing the importance of quality education at this level, the Ministry is currently strongly encouraging the involvement of private institutions and individuals to invest in education at this level. Thus, through nongovernmental organizations, missions, private individuals, religious institutions, and other organizations, a number of preschools are beginning to reemerge in urban areas. Only a very small number of parents, however, can afford tuition for their children to attend such programs.

Concomitant with the lack of access to preschool programs is a lack of qualified teachers in these programs. A recent educational directive (MOE, 2002) requires that those who teach in the few available preschool programs must now be high school graduates who have taken an additional 3 months of specialized training from a preschool teacher-training institute. Sites for obtaining such training (and funds to attend), however, are scarce.

The Preschool Teacher Training Institute (PTTI), established in Addis Ababa in 1986, is one of the few

Table 1. General Types of Pre-K/Elementary Schools in Ethiopia

Program Type	Funding	Children/Families Served	Generally Perceived Quality	Generally Perceived Limitations
Private Schools	Parent fees	Upper SES families	Very high quality of education	Potential conflicts between private school curricula and MOE curricular guidelines.
Public Schools	Government stipend plus parent fees	Middle- and upper-class families	High-quality education	Potential conflicts between MOE and School governing boards composed of elected parents.
Government Schools	Government stipend plus parent fees	General population/Lower SES families	Basic education	Lack of materials, large (50–100+) class size, poor management, little inservice preparation after teachers begin their job.
Mission Schools	Religious denomination sponsor	Middle and upper SES families and a few scholarships for lower SES children	Good-quality education	Limited input from parents
Church Schools	Church stipend plus parent fees	Middle and upper SES families and a few scholarships for lower SES children	Good-quality education	Limited input from parents
Community	Parent fees	Foreign diplomats and upper SES families	High-quality education	Although in Ethiopian community, school culture and traditions of Western culture are emphasized
Nongovernment Organization (NGO) Schools	Funded by contract between MOE and NGO for specific period of time. After time expires, it is hoped the government and local community will assume costs.	Lower SES children/families	Basic education	Although established, local community may still be unable to sustain their share of costs after the contract expires

PTTIs in the country. During the 3-month specialized training program at this institute, trainees engage in basic coursework emphasizing the preparation of preschool teaching materials. Courses are organized in 12-course modules that include: preschool pedagogy, child psychology, health and nutrition, language development, pre-math, environmental education, arts and crafts, music, health and physical education, preschool management and administration, and play. Following this coursework, trainees engage in a short practicum with children using the materials they constructed through the modules.

Primary Grade Education

Given the magnitude of problems with providing high-quality education for preschool children, the current government in Ethiopia has made the decision to invest more heavily in what most nations describe as "basic" education—that is, education of elementary grade children. In Ethiopia, basic education refers to school-age children from Grades 1–4 (Cycle 1) and Grades 5–8 (Cycle 2). In this regard, the government recently began to increase support for Teacher Training Institutes (TTIs) and Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) which are responsible for producing primary teachers. For those committed to teaching younger children, one year of specialized training had previously been required after completion of Grade 12. In response to a greater demand for primary teachers, however, most current educational reforms recommend this training may be provided upon completion of Grade 10 at TTIs and TTCs. To support this rapidly increasing demand for primary teachers, the number of TTIs has increased in the country, and almost

all administrative regions now have at least one such institution. In addition, many institutions that previously offered only 1-year programs for Cycle 1 teacher preparation recently have expanded and begun to offer 2-year preparation programs for Cycle 2 teacher preparation.

Despite the government's goal of improving the *quality of teacher education*, the lack of sufficient qualified teachers remains a major problem. For example, only 23% of the teachers of children in the second cycle currently hold even a diploma or higher level of training. Furthermore, the education of those with such credentials is mostly highly academic and nearly devoid of skills that might help teachers prepare for the challenges of real classrooms. In response to this challenge, the Ministry now sponsors inservice summer programs for thousands of teachers. These programs are believed to be critically important to enable school teachers to meet the demands of the new curriculum reforms that have been taking place in the country since the early 1990s (MOE, 2000/2001).

CHALLENGES TO EARLY EDUCATION IN ETHIOPIA

Given scarce resources of the developing nation of Ethiopia, the government has determined that improvement of primary education is the best hope for its future. Yet, even at the primary level, children and teachers are confronted by problems not easily overcome. These include major economic barriers, early marriage and traditional female roles, attitudes toward education, preparation of teachers, and classroom realities.

Basic Economic Barriers

Especially in rural Ethiopia, where the majority of the population live, day-to-day economic realities seriously impede prospects for improving the education of very young children. The Ethiopian economy is based on agriculture, a sector of the economy that suffers from recurrent droughts and inefficient cultivation practices. Because of these factors, 45% of the population is below international poverty measures (CIA-World Factbook-Ethiopia, 2003). Thus, in order for many families to survive, children in rural areas are needed to help support the family by herding animals and assisting with the crops rather than attending school. In urban areas, on the other hand, this view has been changing. Since education is seen as one of the few means for economic improvement in the city, increasing numbers of urban families now hire tutors at home to assist very young children in receiving better academic preparation in hopes they will be more successful in schools.

Early Marriage/Traditional Female Roles

Early marriage and traditional female roles generate still further barriers to early education. These traditions, though changing in towns and cities, are still evident among the vast majority of the population of rural Ethiopia. Families see early marriage as a way to improve the family's economic status, to strengthen ties between marrying families, to increase the likelihood that girls will be virgins at marriage, and to avoid the possibility of having an unmarried daughter later in life. These attitudes and values seriously impede the participation of females in education at nearly all levels. Although such views are beginning to change in the larger cities, it is not uncommon to see children (primarily females) married as early as ages 9–12. Along with such marriages are often early pregnancies and accompanying birth complications for child-mothers whose bodies are not mature enough to support pregnancy and childbirth. Such complications often result in serious injury and/or death of both infants and mothers—placing even greater economic demands on survivors. Moreover, since girls tend to marry so early and are quickly relegated to a life of childcare and traditional chores, it is little wonder that families with such limited incomes are unwilling to invest financially in the education of females. To address this problem, the MOE has been working on ways to include formal discussion of such issues in emerging curricular materials.

Attitudes Toward Education

Low educational attainment and aspirations of most parents pose another challenge facing early education. In a society where the literacy rate is 43%, the level of educational aspiration for children tends to be lower (CIA-World Factbook-Ethiopia, 2003). Further, parents who hope education will provide advancement opportunities for their children are unaware of decades of research strongly supporting play-oriented approaches to learning in the early grades over the traditional academic approaches (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). During informal interviews conducted by the authors with a number of preschool teachers in 2001, one teacher depicted the feelings of many families as follows:

> Most families don't know the significance of preschool education in general and the role of play in the educational life of children in particular. As a result of this, even those families who send their children to preschools assess the performance of their children in terms of their academic achievement, i.e., to what extent a child is able to count numbers, recite the alphabet, etc. That is one reason why most of the preschools

follow teaching methods similar to the primary school children rather than emphasizing creative play.

Lower educational aspirations for children might also be accounted for by the very remote probability of their children being admitted to higher education intuitions on completion of secondary education. Currently, however, the government is opening new higher education institutions and expanding existing programs. Such expansion should increase the likelihood of admission of more students and give increasing numbers of students and parents greater hope that higher education pursuits will be rewarded.

Perceptions of Teaching as a Profession

As in many countries of the world, teaching young children in Ethiopia is considered among the lowest rungs of professions. Thus, comparatively low salaries result in little interest in teaching as a career path. As a result, after only 1 or 2 years of service, many new primary teachers leave the profession for higher paying jobs. Thus, new teachers often consider teaching as only a stepping-stone for future career opportunities.

Classroom Realities

Day-to-day classroom realities such as high student–teacher ratio, lack of school materials, curriculum concerns, and gender bias, pose serious challenges to teachers as they begin their work. One such reality is the teacher–child ratio existing in most schools. In observations of Cycle 1 schools during seven site visits over the past 3 years, for example, authors observed classes with teacher–child ratios from 1:60 to 1:90. Such ratios certainly pale the complaints of teachers in most countries who express concerns about class sizes of 25 or 30 students.

In addition to teacher–child ratios, Abebe (1998) aptly describes current classroom realities regarding teaching materials:

> In elementary schools it is a common sight to observe one book shared among four to five students. In classrooms where children are sitting so close together that free movement is almost impossible . . . the teacher cannot move around to attend to individual students. He or she can only stand in front and lecture. The teaching and learning environment is so uninviting that both teachers and students are not motivated at all. It is a situation in which teachers have lost their enthusiasm to teach, and students have lost their interest to learn. (p. 20)

In addition to the above physical realities of classrooms, under the most recent reforms teachers are given additional responsibilities of adapting the national curriculum to specialized needs of local regions. Since over 80 different languages are spoken in Ethiopia, even this simple curricular innovation poses a major burden on already overextended teachers.

SUMMARY/IMPLICATIONS

This article explored historical roots and current challenges to improving early education in Ethiopia. In addition, encouraging trends relating to early education were shared. These include increased involvement of private institutions, organizations, and individuals in supporting preprimary education and the MOE's recent efforts in expansion and improvement of primary education. Moreover, to achieve its goal of higher quality primary education, the Ministry is directing major efforts toward improved teacher training. In this regard, efforts to assure stronger linkages between college instruction and classroom practices appear especially productive since traditional instruction was nearly devoid of such linkages. Improving the situation requires interventions in the teacher education programs that involve supervised student teaching experiences and the reorientation of the teacher educators themselves in the pedagogy of primary education.

Clearly, the best hope for ameliorating the plethora of problems facing Ethiopia in the future is an investment in high-quality early education today. As this article suggests, although much progress has been made in this regard in recent years, much work remains to be done.

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